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AUTHOR	Spanos, George; Smith, Jennifer J.
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ABSTRACT

Closed captioning is the process by which audio portions of television programs are transcribed into words that appear on the television screen at the same time as the program. This digest focuses on using closed captioned television for teaching limited-English-speaking literacy learners, and looks at: (1) the educational uses of closed captioned television (CCTV); (2) CCTV for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) elementary students as well as adult students; and (3) the identification, selection, and adaptation of CCTV for materials for use with adult ESL literacy learners. (VWL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ERIC Digest. Prepared by George Spanos and Jennifer J. Smith

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ERIC National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education
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Digest

Closed Captioned Television for Adult LEP LiteracyLearners

Prepared by George Spanos, Center for Applied Linguistics
Jennifer J. Smith, Arlington Refugee Education and Employment Program

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Closed captioning is the process by which audio portions of television programs are transcribed into written words that appear on the television screen at the same time as the program. Captions are similar to the subtitles used for foreign language films, but differ in that they can be received only through the use of an electronic decoder, or "black box." In addition, live programs, such as the evening news and sports events, can be simultaneously captioned.

Closed captioning technology was originally devised for the benefit of the deaf, but there has been recent interest on the part of reading and literacy specialists in the use of closed captioned television (CCTV) with hearing audiences as well. A wide variety of public and commercial television programs of potential use in reading instruction are closed captioned, including news, documentaries, dramas, movies, sitcoms, and advertisements. The major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, and the Fox Television Network) offer more than 400 hours of captioned television per week. Almost 100 percent of all major network primetime programs are closed captioned, as are a large percentage of sports and children's programs. Thus, educators may choose from an abundant supply of programs of potential use with language learners of all ages and interests.

According to guidelines approved by Congress in 1981, non-profit educational institutions are permitted to record and use television programs for instructional purposes so long as certain conditions are met:

- Only public and commercial programs may be used;
- Individual teachers (not media librarians or other support personnel) must initiate the recording;
- Recordings must carry the copyright notice;
- Recordings may be used for instructional purposes only;
- Recordings must be used within ten consecutive school days of the time the recording was made;
- Recordings may be shown only once within this ten-day period although the showing may be repeated once if required for instructional purposes;
- Parts of programs may be shown, but these may not be edited to produce anthologies; and
- Tapes must be erased within 45 days of the original recording.

Educational Uses of Closed Captioned Television

Educators have begun to investigate the use of CCTV as a language and literacy learning tool. Studies to investigate the potential uses of CCTV in teaching reading to members of the hearing community have been commissioned by organizations such as the National Captioning Institute (NCI) in Falls Church, VA, and the Caption Center in Boston, MA. These studies have focused on students learning English as a second language (ESL), students in remedial reading programs, students who are learning disabled, and adults who are functionally illiterate.

Probably the most widely used educational application of CCTV is with students learning English as a second language. In many school districts, ESL students are taught in special classes until their test scores indicate their potential to succeed in the regular classroom. Educators are seeking innovative approaches that will enable ESL students to participate in mainstream content classes while continuing to develop their English language skills.

Video technology provides just such an innovation. People of all ages and educational backgrounds seem to be attracted to television, and numerous captioned television programs and tapes can be used in conjunction with specific curriculum topics and objectives. For example, CCTV has been found to improve the sight vocabulary of adult literacy students (Bean & Wilson, 1989), and to provide reinforcement for new vocabulary in the second language class by providing a context for its use (Gillespie, 1981). CCTV has also been shown to facilitate listening comprehension and the acquisition of native-English speech patterns in ESL learners (Price, 1983). Studies also report the motivating influence of captioned television, and extremely positive attitudes on the part of students toward this medium (Bean & Wilson, 1989). The use of closed captioned primetime television programs with high school ESL students and students in remedial reading programs increased the students' motivation, and resulted in an improvement in their English vocabulary, reading comprehension, and word analysis skills (Goldman &Goldman, 1988).

Other studies that cite the benefits of captioned programming and films for nonnative English speaking and remedial students are Maginnis (1987); Parlato (1985); Koskinen, Wilson, and Jensema (1986); and Huffman (1986).

CCTV for ESL Elementary Students

A study conducted with fourth- through sixth-grade ESL students in Prince George's County, MD (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1989), revealed a variety of potential benefits of CCTV:

- CCTV provides speech, writing, and supportive visual context simultaneously, making lessons accessible to students who use different types of learning strategies.
- Second language learners generally like CCTV and demonstrate a strong sense of achievement when they are able to comprehend the information presented through CCTV.
- CCTV can be used with heterogenous groups of students. Less proficient students may be able to understand individual words from either the audio or visual track, while more proficient students may be able to process language from both tracks, perhaps even noticing discrepancies between the two, and thereby becoming more conscious of language use and form.
- Language use in CCTV classrooms is rich in terms of the variety of speech acts generated by the students. One observer noticed, for example, that students were eager to initiate questions and comments about the CCTV instruction.

Classroom teachers involved in the study identified a number of other advantages provided by CCTV, including the following: a variety of language and literacy activities; increased opportunity for students to read; visual reinforcement of word/image associations; a challenge to read quickly and to pick out key words; an opportunity for auditory discrimination through comparison of captions and audio; an opportunity to study the correspondence between spoken and written language; a means of checking or reinforcing listening comprehension; and novelty, which serves as a motivator.

Evidence of the effectiveness of CCTV instruction with the students included the following: increased oral participation on the part of the students; increased awareness of language as evidenced by requests for clarification; and the regular use by students of expressions learned from the videos, such as "Get out of here!" and "Happy landing!" from *Sesame Street* episodes.

Closed Captioned Television for Adult ESL Learners

A recent action research project conducted by Smith (1990) investigated how CCTV could be used to help teach ESL to adults enrolled at the Arlington County, VA, Refugee Education and Employment Program. This program serves students from all over the world who speak a wide variety of native languages. They provide a remarkably diverse laboratory for investigating the effects of any educational innovation focusing on adult learners of English. Smith found corroboration of many of the findings of the elementary school study discussed above. She found that students were immediately attracted to the CCTV technology. They paid rapt attention to the screen and worked hard to decipher the language. They spontaneously wrote down the unknown words they saw on the screen. Thus, the captions enabled students to identify the written forms of familiar vocabulary, and reinforced the meaning in an audio and video format.

Students often repeated phrases from the captions over and over to themselves while watching. On subsequent viewing of a program, they paid greater attention to the captions, anticipating the spoken text by saying the phrase aloud as soon as it appeared on the screen, even before it was spoken on the audio track. In addition, students used vocabulary from the program in follow-up discussions and written exercises. Smith hypothesized that seeing and hearing the words used repeatedly in the context of a coherent story with video cues made them appear more real--words students could actually use in everyday conversations.

Smith concluded that CCTV has great potential for teaching adult ESL students. Captioning transforms the seductive medium of television into a literacy and language learning tool and helps introduce newcomers to an important conveyor of culture and information. Smith warns, however, that care must be taken in identifying suitable programming. Students approach programs with varying degrees of linguistic proficiency and familiarity with the cultural contexts involved. Because many of the captioned programs most suited for classroom use, *e.g., Sesame Street, 3-2-1 Contact,* and *Reading Rainbow* are intended for young viewers, special preparations are necessary to avoid insulting adult learners, if such programs are to be used with that population.

Identifying, Selecting, and Adapting CCTV Materials for Use with Adult ESL Literacy Learners

Parks (1986) urges that teachers exercise care in the selection of CCTV programs for classroom use. Both suitability and familiarity of subject matter need to be considered, and the level of difficulty of both the captions and the audio must be taken into account. In developing exercises and lesson plans, Parks recommends that the teacher do the following:

- Prepare mangeable tasks that match students' ability levels;
- Promote active and full participation of students;
- Control the length of the lesson to ensure maximum concentration and interest;
- Provide for student control of the presentation by giving students opportunities to operate the television and VCR; and
- Give students ample opportunities to review.

Koskinen, Wilson, and Jensema (1986) provide ideas for developing reading lessons using captioned materials with adults, with lesson outlines and sample lesson plans. Ideas for lesson plans are also provided by Parks (1986) and Parlato (1985).

The Caption Center has developed CC Writer, for creating closed captions and subtitles, and CC Jr., which produces open captions using an ordinary videocassette recorder, an IBM PC, a standard word processor, and a specially-modified adapter. These products make it possible to develop tailor-made texts for video programs, matched to the specific proficiency levels and needs of particular groups of students.

For More Information

The Caption Center, 125 Western Avenue, Boston, MA 02134, (617) 492-9225.

The Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd St. N.W., Washington, DC 20037, (202) 429-9292.

The National Captioning Institute, Inc., 5203 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041, (703) 998-2400.

The Arlington Refugee Education and Employment Program, Wilson School, 1601 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22201, (703) 358-4200.

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